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ABSTRACT

To determine how some learning disabled students manage to achieve success in college, a study investigated the extent to which successful learning disabled college students demonstrate characteristics often attributed to learning disabled students in general: inactive learners who fail to use efficient, organized strategies and who lack self-knowledge about the nature of their disability, about its limitations, and about general strategies for coping with their disability. Subjects, three junior and one senior learning disabled college students, were interviewed and administered the "Advanced Reading Inventory." Results indicated that these students overcame their learning disabilities by applying sound reading skills and a range of strategies to exploit their strengths and cope with their learning disabilities. Specifically, findings showed that subjects, when reading the passages aloud and talking and writing about them, made use of (1) several metacomprehension word attack strategies for text processing, including text structure clues, prior knowledge, and strategic learning; (2) two macrorules for summarizing text: deletion and generalization; and (3) self-awareness attribution patterns and the following coping strategies: using strengths, limiting ths use of the deficit area, and getting help from a tutor or monitor. These findings suggest that personal responsibility for learning outcomes can be reinforced in learning disabled students by developing healthy, internal attributions for academic success and failure, and by encouraging learning disabled students to exploit their strengths and to develop appropriate coping strategies. (Excerpts from interviews and reading protocols, as well as five pages of references are included.) (JD)

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Coping Strategies of Four Successful Learning Disabled College Students: A Case Study Approach

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Coping Strategies of Successful Learning Disabled College Students: A Case Study Approach

Learning disabled students are often characterized by their tendency to attribute success and failure to causes outside their control (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Dweck, 1975; Johnston & Winograd, 1985), and by their lack of self-awareness with regard to their learning disability and learning strategies (Brown & Palincsar, 1982; Torgesen, 1982; Weiner, 1983; Wong, 1985). Together, these characteristics can be so debilitating as to all but ensure failure on academic tasks and limit career and life options (Johnston, 1985).

Attribution theory (e.g., Covington & Omelich, 1979; Weiner, 1979) suggests that a student's performance on a task is influenced by his/her perceptions of the causes of past behavior. Researchers investigating attributions made by students in learning situations (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Butkowsky & Willows, 1980) have found that students who attribute their performance to a stable, controllable factor (such as effort) maintain their effort in the face of failure, while those who attribute performance to uncontrollable factors (such as luck, the task, the teacher, ability) are likely to show deterioration of effort in the face of failure.

Central to metacognitive theory is that students actively participate in the learning process through planning, monitoring, and recovering (Armbruster, Echols, & Brown, 1984; Harter, 1982). Learning disabled students are often desribed as inactive

learners who fail to use efficient, organized strategies (Johnston & Winograd, 1984) and who lack self-knowledge about the nature of their disability, its limitations, and general strategies for coping with their disability (Licht, 1983).

This study investigated the extent to which these characteristics applied to a unique population of successful learning disabled college students. This paper presents selected findings from four case studies designed to determine how juniors and seniors in college, who had been identified in high school as learning disabled, managed to persist. Attributional and metacognitive theories were the frameworks used to guide the development and selection of interview questions and stimuli for obtaining verbal reports.

METHOD

Subjects

Junior and senior-level college students who had been diagnosed as learning disabled were recruited for the investigation. Students were required to document their disability with high school records. Selection procedures resulted in a pool of five students, four of which were chosen, three juniors and one senior. Junior or senior-level status was used as the criterion for persistence.

Tasks

Each subject met with the researchers for a total of three one-hour sessions. In the first session interview data were collected. Sessions two and three were primarily devoted to

obtaining verbal reports on reading comprehension and summarizing strategies. The verbal report methodology is gaining acceptance as a valid data source (Afflerbach, 1986; Afflerbach & Johnston, 1984; Johnston, 1985).

Two college-level passages of similiar length from the Advanced Reading Inventory (Johns, 1984) were used. With the first text (238 words), "The American", subjects were directed to read aloud and report on the processes they used for constructing an interpretation of the text. Subjects were asked to stop after each sentence and report on their processes; although they could verbalize any time. With the second text, "Beards" (250 words), subjects were asked to construct a written summary and verbalize thought processes while constructing the summary.

Transcriptions from these sessions yielded over 250 pages of protocal data. Due to the length limitations of this paper, interview and verbal report data must be presented in abridged form. The excerpts included in this paper upon which conlusions are based are selected samples that represent comparable information produced by more than one subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Text Processing Strategies: Evidence of Metacomprehension

Word Attack Strategies

When the readers encountered an unfamiliar word or phrase, they made extensive use of their general knowledge and the context in order to figure it out. In this way, our learning disabled college readers were characteristic of good

comprehenders who use context-driven strategies as much as possible in constructing interpretations of the text (Baker & Brown, 1984).

Example 1: "Divan--I don't know what that is. How would I try to figure it out? Um, well I'm definitely looking at the context because that's the only thing that's going to give me the clue. Somewhat it looks like it's a--he is in a reclining position on this--whatever it is. I would say he's relaxing and looking up, it seems like he's on a soft chair or couch or something.

For the words which were impossible to figure out through framing them in context, some readers combined a form of phonics or word-part analysis to facilitate word recognition. This combination of strategies is consistent with mature reading (Holdaway, 1979).

Example 2: "As-ker-ist, no, yeah, asterisk. That's the little star, asterisk sign, um, it doesn't look familiar but once I sounded it out, um, when I heard it it make sense to me."

Example 3: "Um, atomy sorta sounds like autonomy, so I figure that it was talking about the body."

Making Use of Text Structure Cues

Efforts to understand and learn from reading material will be aided if one is able to recognize and capitalize on any structure in the text (Meyer, Brandt, & Bluth, 1980). Text structure cues are often signalled by the repetition of words, phrases and concepts. Good readers can use their textual schemata, or general knowledge of conventions of discourse to help them determine important ideas in a text (Afflerbach, 1986; Anderson, Pichert, & Shirey, 1983). Our readers exhibited knowledge and use of text structure cues.

Example 4: "Well, I´m going to go on and see if it was mentioned again or described in more detail, you know, mentioned again someplace. And if it´s mentioned again I would get a better grasp of what is meant."

Use of Prior Knowledge

The ability to activate appropriate prior knowledge during reading is an important metacognitive component of sophisticated reading (Spiro, 1979). Our readers made extensive use of their prior knowledge for understanding the passages.

Example 11: "Well, this is just a, um, ´a new kind of arithmetic,´ that is a, that´s a monkey wrench in the whole sentence because Raphael, Titian and Rubins are all artists. How do I know that? Because of general

knowledge. It's a monkey wrench because arithmetic is the antithesis of art, you know, that's what I think."

Strategic Learning

Mature reading involves modifying strategies to suit goals and purposes (Gray, 1917; Rothkopf & Billington, 1979), and knowing when remedial action is necessary (Alessi, Anderson, & Goetz, 1979). The learning disabled subjects often verbalized an understanding of the importance of using different approaches to processing the text relative to their goals.

Example 6: "If this was an English class and I had to know specific dates and specific, um, you know, like writer's style or something, I'd sure go back on it, but if I was reading this for a different type of class, I'd probably--for liesure reading I'd whip right through it, you know, like right now I'd say for liesure reading I would have a grasp."

Macrorules for Summarizing Text

Recently, Brown and her associates (Brown & Day, 1983; Brown & Palincsar, 1982) and others (Torgesen, 1982; Weiner, 1983; Wong, 1985) have proposed that learning disabled readers and poor college readers are unable to employ effective macroprocesses for summarizing text. Competent readers, on the other hand, perform macroprocesses of deletion and generalization for determining

important information in text and deriving gists (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978, 1983). We found plenty of evidence that our learning disabled college readers could successfully use the macroprocesses of deletion and generalization in summarizing text and determining important ideas.

Deletion

Example: 7: "You need to understand the gist first --then I read this short paragraph, this two-sentence paragraph and it doesn´t add anything startling or new to what I already know, so I can skip that paragraph and get more information from this first one and last one."

Generalization

Example 8: "I´m going to see which ones are similar and then group them. In the last paragraph they said two or three different situations but were similar, like king of France and Spain and the Queen of England. They also had similar effects on the people who were wearing beards, so maybe I will summarize it by saying royalty said this--instead of saying the queen said this and the Spanish king said this and the French king said this."

Self-Awareness: Attribution Patterns and Coping Strategies

Attributions

Attribution theory posits that learning disabled students tend to see their success and failures as caused by factors beyond their control (Diener and Dweck, 1978,1980). The students we interviewed often assigned uncontrollable factors such as teachers, the task (ease or difficulty), and luck as causes for their academic successes and failures.

Example 9: "Teachers have failed me."

Example 10: "I had a high school math teacher that liked me, he...got me through."

Example 11: "My success so far is due to luck...it´s catching up with me now, though."

Example12: "I have problems reading because the textbook isn´t clear".

Example13: "If I don´t understand a math problem it´s because they´re too difficult".

Our subjects also saw themselves as lacking ability, a very stable, uncontrollable attribution (Covington, Spratt, & Omelich, 1980). This perception has been linked with the phenomenon of "learned helplessness", a maladaptive behavior pattern in which students who repeatedly encounter failure become inactive learners and view themselves as failures in academic contexts in general (Deiner and Dweck, 1978).

Example 14: "I see it as stuff I wasn´t born with."

Example 15: "I´m not smart."

Example 16: "There´ not a lot I can do to change myself."

However, our findings regarding the students´ global self-perceptions were revealing. While it is true that they saw themselves as lacking ability in their deficit areas, the perception was not transferred to their academic self-concepts in general. That is, they were each able to speak confidently about a skill area that they excelled in.

Example 17: "I am very good in art."

Example 18: "Math is no problem for me."

Example 19: "I´m really good at assembly language, programming".

Example 20: "I´ve become a good speaker."

We can assume, therefore, that any potentially debilitating effects of seeing oneself as "helpless" with regard to one aspect of academic performance does not, at least for these students, preclude the possibility of a healthy global self-concept.

It has been demonstrated in recent attributional literature that when introduced to failure, learning disabled students have been found to decrease their effort on a task, and avoid similar learning stuations in the future (Diener & Dweck, 1978,1980). We found it significant that the learning disabled students we interviewed tended not to be passive, inactive learners. Nor did they decrease their effort in the face of failure. Instead these students tended to persist in their efforts, in spite of continued depressed affect and negative feelings associated with their failure. Statements that follow demonstrate this intention

to keep going:

Example 21: "You just keep at it."

Example 22: "I just work real hard."

Example 23: "I keep going with what works"

Example 24: "Just keep hammering away."

Example 25: "I suppose I'm stubborn, if I weren't, I wouldn't be here."

Thus, despite feelings of helplessness and lack of control in their disability areas, these students stated that persistence was a major reason for their successes.

Coping Strategies

It is clear that the students we spoke with would not continue to persist if they were merely exposing their most vulnerable areas again and again in the classroom. We reasoned that there must be other characteristics that separate them from their unsuccessful disabled peers. Indeed, throughout the course of the interview process, our subjects described several strategies that they routinely used for coping with the academic demands of college.

Utilize strengths. Each of the students was able to talk enthusiastically about a skill that was enjoyable, required less effort, and brought them feelings of success. Similarly, each was pursuing a program of study that related at least indirectly to the favored skill area. One student described his most successful learning as involving "touching, doing, seeing" and was enrolled in a program in industrial education. Similarly, a

student whose self-identified strengths lay in art, was pursuing a degree in the field. And another who preferred math over reading was finishing a degree in computer science.

Limit the use of the deficit area. Each subject was able to clearly and consistently describe the nature of their learning disability, and each made statements emphasizing the necessity of working around the deficit area. This was true despite differences in the nature of each disability. For instance, one student whose disability included hyperactivity, which made it difficult to study for long periods of time without extreme frustration, gave us one of his strategies for coping: "Most often is, I just put it down and come back to it. A lot of tasks seem big all at once but if you break them down and make small hunks out of it, a little at a time it gets done." In contrast, a subject whose greatest difficulty was writing, especially term papers, told us: "I avoid classes that involve lots of writing... anything to avoid failure is positive." Another subject simply put it this way: "I have to find a creative way to get around it (the disability)."

Get help. Although the preceeding strategies have been useful to these students, there have unfortunately been instances when they were of no use. In these cases our subjects offered one answer unanimously; get help, and get it early. Each subject sought a "tutor" or "mentor"--someone who did more than read their papers or reviewed math homework--but also provided guidance and personal attention. One student stated: "I need

someone who can give me instant rewards, or at least instant feedback so I can try it again." Another student described his fear of not finding the kind of help he needs: "I´m ...afraid to go away (to college) again. People could take advantage of me. Having a good relationship with a teacher is a very high priority for me." One of our subjects described her experience in high school with a person who helped her as: "Mostly an experience in organizing my life and values." Thus, for our students a helping person is much more than one who simply bolsters weak skill areas, but clearly provides emotional support as well.

CONCLUSION

Taken toghether, the metacognitive and attributional literature offers little hope of academic success for learning disabled students. They are characterized by their inability to use organized, sophisticated learning strategies, their low expectations for success, and their lack of persistence in the face of failure. Yet, we discovered a unique group of students who in spite of their disabilities have found ways to surmount these formidable barriers to learning. Their success is attributable to sound reading skills, and a range of strategies for exploiting their strengths and coping with their disability.

While we strongly endorse early detection and remediation, alternatives must be considered for students who have been provided unsuccessful instruction or whose learning disability has gone undetected beyond the early grades. For these individuals we believe a successful approach would be to

emphasize strategies for "getting through." Learning disabled students can be made more self-aware not only in terms of their reading and learning processes but also about the nature of their disability. They can be helped to eliminate unrealistic expectations in deficit areas. Personal responsibility for learning outcomes can be reinforced by developing healthy, internal attributions for academic success and failure. Most importantly, however, much attention should be devoted to encouraging learning disabled students to exploit their strengths and to develop appropriate coping strategies.

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